

## HANDS ACROSS THE TABLE

With the holidays approaching, I'm in a family gathering state of mind. I think about baking pies and families holding hands around the Thanksgiving table. Then I remember, some of our relatives are so mad at each other, a boxing match is more likely than a love feast.

It seems like families divide over the silliest things. An unpaid loan, a word untimely spoken, feuds over Aunt Lilly's china—it's crazy but we know it's true. We spend so much time with our fists clenched, that we barely remember how to open them. Have you ever noticed how painful clenched fists are after a while? It's hard work keeping those 27 bones in a tight grip.

It's "righteous" indignation that keeps our fists balled up in fetal-like position. It seems we can never let go because we're so right. Yes, forgiveness can be hard work. But, when we ask that the work of our hands be blessed, we can also ask that this blessing include the work of reaching, touching, comforting and forgiving. We can ask that the tilling of our hands include the tilling of hearts.

Family is a constant. We're connected in a way absent in any other relationship. When life curves, or tragedy hits, where do we go? When our friendships fade and our possessions turn rusty, what's left on this earth? Family.

Yet, we still have tough decisions to make about holiday gatherings. Can we invite Uncle Joe and not his wife who drinks too much? Or what about Cousin Ella's kids who love to swing your cat by its tail? I admit, sometimes it's tempting to lock your door, let the phone ring and dodge the drama. But where does that leave us?—holding an empty Christmas stocking and a cold TV dinner, that's where.

When I asked my mother about this, she reminded me, "Well, if Jesus could eat with tax collectors and sinners, the least we can do is have dinner with a few stray sheep."

Everyone I know has at least one stray sheep in the family. The cousin no one has talked to in ten years; the banished sister who "married outside her element"; and of course, Uncle Joe's wife who backed her car into your mail box last Christmas—can we bring them back into the fold? Can we unclench those 27 bones just enough to across the table to another clenched fist aching to unfold?

Isn't that what the holidays are all about anyway? Forgiving those who have hurt us, knowing we've done our share of hurting too. Giving thanks for what we have even though it never seems enough. Can we take the time to soothe an aching heart drowning in this or that vice? This is what family should be all about too-- loving the unlovable, reaching out to salve broken hearts. It starts with our own families. It ends there too, at least in this earthly realm.

So, let us dust off the silk flower arrangement and not over-worry about Uncle Joe's wife. Fill her cup with sparkling grape juice. You never know, with a little family kindness, she may come to prefer it.